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A statement on the training and placement of blind individuals as social workers or vocational rehabilitation counselors, prepared by the Committee on the Employment of Blind Inidviduals in the Professions of the New York State Federation of Workers for the Blind, is presented in a question and answer format. The blind have repeatedly demonstrated that they can function effectively in a variety of situations without the use of normal vision. A blind trainee would be (1) expected to meet the same eligibility requirements and standards for graduate programs as a trainee with normal vision, and (2) demonstrate adjustment to his own condition. He can also provide the same services and function in much the same way as his sighted colleagues. The blind can communicate and relate effectively with clients through special training and the use of special techniques. It is a strongly urged that qualified blind persons be trained and placed as social workers and rehabilitation counselors. (SK)

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BLIND PERSONS AS SOCIAL WORKERS AND REHABILITATION COUNSELORS

STATEMENT OF BASIC PRINCIPLES RELATING TO THE TRAINING AND PLACEMENT OF BLIND PERSONS AS SOCIAL WORKERS AND VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION COUNSELORS PREPARED BY THE COMMITTEE ON THE EMPLOYMENT OF BLIND PERSONS IN THE PROFESSIONS OF THE NEW YORK STATE FEDERATION OF WORKERS FOR THE BLIND

Blind individuals function successfully in the professions of Social Work and Rehabilitation Counseling if properly qualified and trained. Blindness per se does not bar qualified persons from participating in these professions. Many blind persons have already demonstrated their ability to function as competent Social Workers and Rehabilitation Counselors. A large proportion of persons who are classified as blind have residual vision in varying degrees. Sighted persons utilize their vision almost exclusively and they do not need to explore the potential of their other senses. The blind person learns to use his other senses in combination with any residual vision he may have.

Blind people are individuals. They are as different from one another as sighted people. They have experienced the satisfactions and disappointments of everyday living as have sighted people. Also, they have strengths, weaknesses, defenses and compensatory mechanisms as have all people. Old notions of all of the things blind people cannot do have been exploded by the blind person's many successes which required the same persistence, ingenuity, and diligence which contributed to the success of sighted persons. Authorities in the field of rehabilitation have succinctly said that blind persons have become effective and respected employees in the general pattern of the professions as well as in industry and commerce.

Persons who are blind suffer from the prejudices of a sighted population who have for years developed preconceived stereotyped ideas of what blind persons cannot do. Many view blindness as a disability which limits the potential of an

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individual to acquire knowledge and skills for practicing as a Social Worker or a Rehabilitation Counselor. Many sighted persons do not make a fair appraisal of the potential of blind persons. Either the sighted person is unaware of the blind person's potential and does not choose to become knowledgeable or else he recognizes the potential but is reluctant to become involved through fear of not knowing how to work with a blind person.

Persons who are blind have demonstrated that they can function effectively in many areas without the use of normal vision. The training of such persons is basically similar to the training of any person who comes into educational systems for training and for acquiring new skills, new ideas and new methods in preparation for the objective of employment. Just as each sighted person is helped to recognize and meet his individual needs, whatever they might be, so the blind person is assisted in orientation to the environment and equips himself with whatever aids are necessary to attain the objective.

ANSWERS TO TYPICAL QUESTIONS ASKED

Q. Can a blind person do an effective job as a Social Worker or Rehabilitation Counselor?

A. A blind person can do an effective job in both of these professions as well as in other professions. Prior to admission to a post-graduate school, he has prepared himself just as any qualified sighted person would do. In addition, he has met the high standards of the specialized training he needs as an individual to cope with his handicap. High standards for this specialized training have been set forth by federal and state rehabilitation agencies. In most instances, the state displays its confidence in blind persons by providing the counseling and financing of this training. The responsibility for actual training may be assumed by a voluntary agency which is required to maintain the established standards.

Q. Can blind students meet the eligibility requirements for graduate programs of social work or vocational rehabilitation?

A. Blind persons applying for admission to a school of social work or to a program of training as a vocational rehabilitation counselor, should be evaluated on an individual basis, in the same manner as all other students. The criteria for admission, including intelligence, maturity, emotional stability and academic background, should be examined in the same way for both sighted and blind applicants. It is necessary to consider carefully the meaning the blind person attaches to loss of sight and how this has contributed to his concept of self. The applicant who is blind must have demonstrated a real adjustment to his blindness before he is able to help people with their individual problems.

Q. Can the blind student meet the same criteria of learning performance as other students?

A. The blind student can meet the same criteria of learning performance as his sighted counterparts. He can compete with sighted persons in quality and productivity of work. It is true that he may have to learn through different media, but he can and does learn. His success depends as much on the attitude of the school and agency personnel as it does on his individual qualifications. Personnel must be ready to individualize all students regardless of their differences, whatever they might be. The success of a blind student, as well as any student, in a school of social work or a program of vocational rehabilitation is strengthened by the skill of supervision in the field of placement. The supervisor must have sufficient maturity to accept differences in all students. The supervisor should be able to individualize and to evaluate an applicant on the basis of his ability to learn, rather than to place emphasis on the physical disability.

The blind person is generally as well-organized as the sighted student. Inasmuch as the need exists to secure material with dispatch, this organizational capacity is maintained in arranging and planning work assignments. Just as his sighted colleague, he maintains appropriate agency case folders, case controls, resource files, literature, manuals of procedures and related reading matter.

Q. How does the blind person communicate?

A. Through the training and use of varied techniques, the professional blind person develops communication skills which enable him to function in a flexible manner to a high level of independence.

The experience of reading is engaged in by blind persons, just as by sighted persons, through techniques which have been developed in the "reading process". Blind persons read by means of "sighted readers", recording devices, braille and in some instances, optical aids. They are able to read text books, periodicals, case files and related work materials. The use of sighted readers to assist the blind person in schools and public and private agency employment is accepted both in principle and practice. In some instances, a secretary who would normally be working with a professional worker, sighted or blind, could handle the necessary reading. If this service cannot be given, the blind person is responsible for employing a reader and making the necessary financial arrangements. The school or the employer, of course, has every right to interview the reader, especially with respect to judgment in processing confidential material.

The blind person usually has a recording machine, a braille writer, and a typewriter. He has been trained in their use and application. Should the need arise, replacements are secured by the blind person. There are several other

devices which enable the employee to complete printed forms and write script messages.

Writing skills are basic tools in any profession. Blind persons use specialized writing guides as well as typewriters. These skills are mastered early in the rehabilitation process. In the blind person's absence, messages may be taken by the clerk-receptionist and written on a memo pad or "read" into a recording device to be read by the blind person later.

Q. Does blindness affect relationships with clients?

A. It is to be expected that the visual handicap will create some reaction, verbalized or not on the part of both the sighted and non-sighted client. Among the sighted there may be expressions of wonder at what the blind person can do or perhaps expressions of pity over his handicap. The client may also make a comparison of his own problems with that of blindness.

Generally, the client who is involved in his own problems and desires a service does not have a lasting concern for the worker's handicap. Instead, he recognizes the worker's willingness to help and his ability to give a professional service. The blind person must be able to discuss his blindness with ease if the client needs to have him do so.

The blindness itself may be a catalyst towards a quicker and better rapport with the client. There will be those occasions when the factor of blindness may present a barrier to quick rapport but the skill of the professional worker will overcome this, just as the skill of the sighted worker will overcome any difficulties that may arise between himself and the client because of erroneous first impressions on the part of the client.

Q. How will the blind person travel?

A. The blind person referred to a graduate school or for employment should be able to travel safely and effectively. Many blind persons have been sponsored by agencies which provide training techniques of travel. Once he has been oriented to the surroundings, the blind person will move about with little difficulty. As other students and employees arrange car pools, so will the blind person arrange to share in a car pool. As other students and employees go to the lunch room, wash room and locker room, so will the blind employee approach these places independently.

When a blind person gets into a new environment he obtains information about his surroundings through the various techniques he has learned. He has built up patterns of success through sensory training and has acquired confidence. It will take him a short time to learn the various areas he will be using. He will learn them not only by "looking" with his eyes but by moving from place to place and learning through sound, touch and "muscular memory" where places are in relation to other places. When he is oriented to the setting, he will move about with a minimum of difficulty. The blind person makes optimum use of what he hears. The sighted person hears a sound and uses his sight to verify it. A blind person hears the same sound but because of training has developed the ability to interpret it sufficiently without visual verification.

Conclusion

A number of blind persons in the fields of social work and vocational rehabilitation have already demonstrated their ability to serve as competent professional persons in all types of public and voluntary health, education and welfare agencies. Many schools of social work and vocational rehabilitation

have developed increasing confidence in the qualified blind applicant and have accepted a limited number for admission. Many visually handicapped applicants are denied admission to these educational institutions solely on the basis of their handicap. This denial appears to place emphasis on the handicap rather than on the individual's professional qualifications and ability.

The shortage of social workers and rehabilitation counselors in most health, education and welfare agencies is a recognized fact. Qualified blind persons could very well join the staffs of these agencies if given the chance. Opportunities for blind persons are increasing as the schools of social work and special education continue to develop more acceptable attitudes toward the disability of blindness. However, it is felt that additional opportunities should be made available for those blind persons who meet the necessary qualifications.

"I do not distinguish by the eye, but by the mind, which is the proper judge of man",[1] aptly sums up the appropriate attitude which should be assumed in relation to blind persons in the professions of social work and rehabilitation.

1. Moses Hadas - The Stoic Philosophy of Seneca, New York 1958

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